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# Dr. Thomas Whelan, Jr. A True Gentleman and Scholar

Written and spoken by Bradley Wong MD, Saturday, September 18, 1999.

I was fortunate to have been one of Dr. Tom Whelan's residents in general surgery from 1975 to 1980. He was a great teacher, mentor, and friend. He was a brilliant man. His intellect and memory were superhuman. His administrative and organizational skills were extraordinary. His surgical skills and daring, unsurpassed. When you stood next to him, his charisma enveloped and embraced you, his mental hold on you was firm, inescapable.

Yet in addition to his intellectual prowess, he was an insightful person and had a wonderful talent for helping others. He cared about his residents. Though he bullied and inspired us into learning and doing good for patients, he had a huge heart and soul. He saw everyone through each of their individual trials and successes. He had a great humanness about him which endeared him to us all. I have met no other man with such a fantastic mix of attributes.

As a chief resident, I initiated the "Teacher of the Year Award." Our first winner, there could be no doubt, was Tom Whelan. We had to give him a "permanent" award so as to allow others a chance at achieving the honor. The entire medical community has benefited from this man's work. He has affected even those who have never met him or heard of him. Those he taught have taught others, but the impact of his achievements goes beyond this chain of disciples. He influenced the entire surgical community by the knowledge he shared and the moral standards he set.

I was honored to have been asked by his family to speak at his memorial. What follows are some of my words and the words of others who spoke that day.

"Tom Whelan was my teacher and good friend. He trained me. I love this man. In his later years, he became close to my dad, who's in the audience now. My dad gave me my genes, my nearsightedness, and my kidney stones. My second father, Tom Whelan, gave to me one of the greatest gifts, the joy of surgery.

There was good reason why we who served as residents with Tom Whelan called him the GENERAL. Though he was definitely a civilian when he became chairman of the department of surgery, I don't believe he ever read or ever got the letter from the army that officially retired him. Everyone around him, secretary, student, resident, faculty, family, knew exactly where one stood with him...BUCK PRIVATE.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was born to lead: not

by force or coercion, but by the power of example. It was subtle yet unquestionable. So stealthy was he, he got us thinking we thought we had original thoughts. It was the Tom Sawyer phenomenon at its best: we whitewashed his fences and seemed to enjoy it.

It was a privilege and an honor to have served under Tom Whelan. He required your best effort. He of course invented the phrase "attention to detail." He meant it, his motto, our mantra.

Tom Whelan expected, demanded, your dedication, your devotion to your work, to your patients. For our own benefit he jerked our chains, chided our ignorance, spurred us to do better. It was to insure that we gave the best care to our patients. That was his ultimate goal: to turn us into real doctors, skilled yet caring, his own image.

We were, and still are, striving to meet his standards of excellence. He was the gold standard. He knew it. We knew it. But one of the beautiful aspects of this man, was while he knew we would never better him, he took great pride in each of our achievements and accomplishments.

He cared for each of us and treated each of our problems, great and small, with great compassion, understanding and fairness. He expected us to do well at all times, but knew that we could not be perfect at all times.

He was both fatherly and dictatorial, forgiving and relentless. No resident's problem was too insignificant nor overwhelming. He shepherded many of us through hard times. Patiently he advised, cajoled, threatened, encouraged, and entertained.

He set the standards for both the medical and surgical communities. He was inspirational and a master diplomat. The power of his intellect and his boyish charm won the cooperation of the surgical attending physicians, despite their notorious super egos. He fueled and charged the surgical residency program.

His vast knowledge trickled down through his students and peers and became amplified. Even now, we carry out his legacy in the community. Many a patient who has never heard of Tom Whelan is benefiting from his influence.

I believe that all of us who came under the influence of this great man are following his example of doing good for our fellow man. Tom Whelan would like that. He'd be proud. He would like it that his humor, generosity, and kindness have had great and beneficial effects on his friends. He would want that we would set an example



*Dr. Brad Wong and  
Teacher-of-the-Year Whelan*

for others.

I loved his sense of humor, at times impish, always disarming. It took the sting out of his bite and defined the joy of his job and life and of the relationships of the people around him. Rarely did I ever see him without a smile or a laugh.

He was joking with me in the days before he died. I was turning the tables on him, testing his memory. He knew it. Really, he still had that leprechaun grin on his jowl. He's probably prancing around right now on this very stage singing McNamara's band. Off key,

most likely.

Tom Whelan, you were the doctors' doctor, the students' advocate, the patients' friend.

You were an extraordinary healer, teacher, leader, and friend to us all. You remain greatly admired now, as you were when in your prime. We are all grateful to have known you and to have felt the power and grace of your presence. We are better people for it.

You would appreciate how my young friends would address you now. "You da man, Tom Whelan, you da man."



*Yale University days: class of 1943*